

NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Drawn mostly from David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's work, including "Narration in the Fiction Film", "Film Art," "The Classical Hollywood Cinema"

Schemata and style:

Gombrich: Artists use schemata, traditional formal patterns for rendering subject matter. Viewers propose, test, and discard hypotheses based on expectation and probability. "A style, like a culture or a climate of opinion, sets up a horizon of expectations, a mental set, which registers deviations and modifications with exaggerated sensitive."

Norms and a group film style:

These are flexible, stimulating, making the work, as related to craft and materials, have an effective interface with everyday mores, aesthetic goals. Genres or a group style set up a series of bounded alternatives. These include dramatic and stylistic conventions and devices, systems (representation of time, space, sexual/gender codification, etc.), and prescribed relations of systems.

Narrative logic:

The narrative establishes causal relations, definition of events, and parallelisms between events. Assumptions behind all Western narratives include that there are discriminable events, actors and agents, linear chains of cause and effect, main point and secondary points. People always make inferences and guesses and hypotheses. They assume things about human nature, pop psychology, prototypes. They have templates or filing schemata. We create a chronological order in our minds, identifiable locales. People judge narrative film and television by "common sense realism" (it happens that way or not in the real world), genre expectations (allowances especially for stylistic excesses), compositional relevance (x is relevant to the story here), or artistic motivation (x is interesting for its own sake--color, oddness)

SPACE, COMPOSITION, AND EDITING:

Sound, lighting, editing, composition, camera movement can be used to show causes or parallels, or to create emphasis. Media viewers have expectations about the conventional use of style to advance and structure the plot: for example, in production shot used to = scene.

Viewers want technical devices to be used in a narratively predictable way--for example, segmentation into scenes, punctuated by a fade out; montage = omniscient narrator or conveying habitual or ongoing actions; linearity of cause and effect tying together scenes; establishing shots and predictable construction of space; shot and reverse shot for speeches, conversations, fights; voice over narration; close ups for emotion or "pointing"; fadeouts on the audio track.

Metonymy:

An object in the normal mise-en-scene stands for some important plot event, emotion, or theme. For example, a baby, a gun, a threatening sound.

Shot space:

Designates how a coherent world is created visually. Classical cinema uses planes and volumes much more than renaissance perspective -- it's built up out of planes rather than a vanishing point.

Figure-ground relations:

The establishing of a sense of depth. Overlapping creates figure ground relations:

CLOSE FARTHER AWAY

x in foreground-----overlapping
rougher texture-----blurred or indistinct
warm, intense colors-----blues, muted colors
speech-----noise

Scale:

People judge size by familiar scale (HELLSTROM CHRONICLE on insects), vanishing point perspective (skewed if shooting straight up or down). People judge form by light and attached and cast shadows. Figure movement concretizes space. Sonic space is especially important in constructing psychological sense of space.

Off screen space:

Space beyond frame lines, beyond horizon, behind camera. This space is always being manipulated dramatically.

CENTERING:

Rule -- keep important subjects in same area of frame from one cut to other.

Painting tradition -- centered subject. A T-shaped area is privileged: upper one third of frame and center vertical third. Extreme long shots follow landscape tradition and weigh the lower half of image.

To center the figure, use the camera movement for reframing, or cut to show where the figure has gone when it crosses the frame line = frame cutting. Frontality, make body face the camera; if back to us = unimportant for the moment.

Lighting:

Lighting is in stacked planes and emphasizing roundness.

"Cinematographers were careful to alternate planes in contrasting keys and half-tones (a silhouetted foreground, a bright middle ground, a darker background). Hollywood's standardized three point lighting system (key, fill, and backlighting) supplemented by background lighting, eye lights, and other techniques, has as its effect the careful articulation of each narratively relevant plane...A pencil line of light around the body's contour pulls the figure forward. Edge lighting of figures remained common even after fast film stocks and color films enhanced figure separation." ("Classical Hollywood Cinema")

Viewers also expect narrative (plot or dramatic) cohesiveness and verisimilitude -- sets, props, costumes, social plausibility. They also expect genre plausibility.

MUSIC AS PART OF THE OMNISCIENT NARRATION.

Wagner as model: gesamtskunstwerk.

Musical conventions.

Sound is layered in volume and reverberation, especially on the principles of balance, centrality, and spatial definition. These principles and the narrative organization of depth encourage us to read filmic space as story space. Especially doors personalize space in terms of focusing on characters' actions, as do props and close-ups. The organization of film space cues the viewer narrationally.

Omniscient narration:

Both camera movement and continuity editing, especially shot reverse-shot, aids omniscient narration and "makes narration covert by creating the sense that no important scenographic space remains unaccounted for. If shot two shows the important material outside shot one, there is no spatial point we can assign to the narration; the narration is always elsewhere, outside this shot but never visible in the next."

The construction of an ordinary sequence is patterned like the film itself. It opens in a self-conscious narrational way, in an omniscient voice, "with signs, ostentatious camera movements, and telling details leaving the traces of a relatively overt narration." Then the character-oriented chain of causality takes over. We may then have a cut, or a sound-image juxtaposition, or a musical cue, or a detail stressed at the end of the sequence that aids the transition to the next scene.

Both the sequence and the film as a whole rely on the same viewing activities elicited in the spectator -- "creating and checking first impressions; linking actions by their anticipated consequences; weighing and testing alternative hypotheses about causality, time and space."

CANONIC NARRATION:

The principle causal agent is the character, a discriminated individual endowed with a consistent batch of evident traits, qualities, and behaviors. S/he will have clear cut goals and/or problems and will face conflicts with other characters and/or external events.

The story starts at an undisturbed state, from a premise, disturbances and conflicts follow, and the end is decisive (climax). The story must be constrained and delayed, and so information about the main character is usually only released slowly. The main character can learn and change, often through conflict. Women as main characters often have to sacrifice and suffer. The minor characters tend more to be stereotypes; we know all their traits upon first seeing them--this is the locus of women and the oppressed in narratives.

In the canonical narrative, causality is personalized. Causality is character-centered, rather than impersonal (i.e., flood, war). If flood or war start narrative, switches to character-centered causality soon.

Psychology, type, traits are sharply delineated and unambiguous; character consistency, speech and physical behavior and costume are used as projection of personality; use of recurring motifs to delineate character traits; the person's goals shape causality and also narrative duration.

"The classical film has at least two lines of actions, both causally linking the same group of characters. Almost invariably, one of these lines of action involves heterosexual romantic love. Of the 100 films in the unbiased sample, 95 involved romance in at least one line of action, while 85 made that the principal line of action. Screenplay manuals stress love as the theme with greatest human appeal. Character traits are often assigned along genderlines, giving male and female characters those qualities deemed "appropriate" to their roles in romance. To win the love of a man or woman becomes the goal of many characters in classical films. In this emphasis upon heterosexual love, Hollywood continues traditions stemming from the chivalric romance, the bourgeois novel and the US melodrama..... The tight binding of the second line of action to the love interest is one of the most unusual qualities of the classical cinema, giving the film a variety of actions and a sense of comprehensive social 'realism' that earlier drama achieved throughout the use of parallel, loosely related subplots."

The other main story line is about work, social problem, etc. and the two lines are tied up at the climax.

Theatrical troupe composition since the time of Moliere, the devil's wife in medieval theater, and the star system, especially for female stars, indicates how theatrical casting is thought of in terms of the conventions of representing heterosexual romance.

STORY ORDER:

Story order is conventionally one of these three types: chronological, in medias res, flashback -- usually motivated by character memory, rarely flashforward. Psychological causality will guide us toward the motifs and actions already marked as potentially meaningful. The plot will "tag" certain things for recall, e.g., foreshadowing. Deadlines are often given in the narrative itself, as in making an appointment or a date. Use of montage sequence for compression. Films can also be based on routines and cycles.

In editing, shot change usually precedes dialogue change.

Dissolves and fades and wipes conventionally indicate different lapses of time and/or place.

Metz's categories: 1) screen time = real time.

2) Unimportant things left out.

3) Representative moments shown.

Note how 2 and 3 erase images of labor, especially domestic labor.

4) Crosscutting on actions or symbolically uses consecutive order, ellipsis, and/or an overall sense of simultaneity.

Note what is communicated and what hypotheses are set in motion by the credits, opening sequences, first glimpse of a character or locale, first actions. These are usually heavily expository. Exposition can come early or late or be continuous. If it comes late, it can feed into an aroused curiosity or it can cause the viewer to suspend formation of strong or absolute hypotheses.

Syuzhet or plot regulates time, meaning duration and frequency of x elements. In particular, it sets up gaps, both spatial and temporal. These gaps can be temporary or permanent, diffuse or focused; flaunted or suppressed.

The syuzhet repeats. Redundancy is important socially and ideologically; things in the drama or narration or documentary reinforce each other. Narratives often use explicit repetition; use consistent point of view; present events more than once.

Repetition's rule of threes: an event becomes important if it is mentioned three times--once for the smart viewer, once for the average viewer, once for the slow Joe in the back row. The epilogue or narration summary at end.

Spectators form hypotheses. What is probable? If this, not that -- basis of exclusivity. Several things considered at once -- may be guilty, may be not guilty -- simultaneity. Hypotheses get ranked in order of probability and narrowed to a few distinct alternatives. Surprise and disorientation are secondary to suspense as to which alternatives will be confirmed.

NARRATION AND REALISM:

NOTE THE CONVENTIONALITY OF THE FEW DISTINCT ALTERNATIVES THAT A FICTIONAL OR DOCUMENTARY NARRATIVE GETS NARROWED DOWN TO. NOTE THE CONVENTIONALITY OF VILLAINS, PEJORATIVES, KINDS OF ADVERSITY SET UP TO RETARD THE RESOLUTION.

A fictional or documentary narrative can vary in the depth of knowledge it provides, either about objective situations or about subjective states or conditions. It may be restricted to a single character's point of view or a brief period of chronological time, but that does not say anything about the depth of knowledge gained, either subjective or objective. Myth of "balance" or "objectivity" or "well-rounded perspective."

Omniscience and homogeneity and omnipresence in both fictional and documentary media: "The narration is unwilling to tell all but it is willing to go anywhere....Tendency (is) to collapse narration into camerawork: the camera can roam freely, crosscutting between locales or changing its position within a single room." Camerawork always drops narrational hints.

A media narrative may be self-conscious about addressing an audience. This can include the filmmaker, actor, etc. addressing the camera, showing the process, Brechtian

separation of elements and disjuncture or alienation effects. It may also be in the style, such as a musical's grouping the characters for our best view or the kind of mise-en-scene chosen for an interview.